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Change in Jewish Education: Prescriptions and Paradoxes[1]

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In American life today change is in the air. The entry of new words into our vocabulary, such as "corporate downsizing," and "reinventing government" are an indication of the ferment in both the profit and non-profit sectors of the economy. The title of a recently published book, *Rethinking America*, says it all.

The impulse to change has found its way into Jewish life as well. Data from the 1990 National Jewish Population Study impelled federations and foundations to re-think Jewish institutional life. Of all American Jewish institutions, the ones most affected by this groundswell have been those whose mission involves Jewish education. In the name of the newest goal, *continuity*, old institutions are said to be in need of *transformation*. Under this banner, a wide range of projects have been initiated, each holding out the promise of change. The projects themselves have been evaluated elsewhere[2]; like most change efforts they have had mixed results—some have been remarkably successful, others dismal failures, while most fall somewhere in between.

This paper focuses less on the programmatic content of the different efforts than on the theories of change which underlie them. What do we know about change in Jewish education? What distinguishes change efforts that are successful from those that are less so? If one wanted to be successful in changing an institution (and who would want to attempt change and not be successful?), how might one go about it?

Our own interest in change is very immediate; each of us directs a project which aims to change, in some fundamental way, an educational institution. Both in our initial design of these projects and in our ongoing attempt to understand their unfolding, we have relied heavily on a number of different sources: the extensive (and rapidly expanding) literature on change in both corporations and public schools; a much smaller, but also growing, body of literature on change in Jewish institutions; and anecdotal evidence from a number of recent projects aimed at improving some facet of Jewish education. Some ten to twenty efforts (each involving between three and ten sites) whose goal to "transform" Jewish educational institutions are currently underway. This paper represents a rudimentary step to set forth a common framework and a common language within which different projects can locate themselves, examine one another's assumptions, and explain both the successes and challenges.

The paper takes as its point of departure a simple observation—that the word change" is both a verb and a noun. In its most simple definition (the first listed in the dictionary), change is a verb, the act of "causing [a situation,, state or thing] to be different." When we ask, "what is the best way to change things?" we are invoking the term as a verb. But when we ask, "what changes are really significant?" we are asking about the noun which, as the dictionary puts it, is "the *result* of altering or modifying."

Most written accounts of change in Jewish education use the term "change" as a noun; they posit a set of desired outcomes, sometimes painting vivid portraits of institutions in their altered state (Woocher 1992; Aron 1995; Kraus 1995; Abrams, Carr and

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Cosden 1995). This paper begins with change as a noun, and asks: what type of change is likely to make a difference for the Jewish community? Our main focus, however, is on change as a process. We offer five possible explanations for the failure of so many change efforts; when turned around, these explanations yield five prescriptions for would-be change efforts, including our own. These prescriptions alone, however, fail to capture the lived experience of successful change, and the lessons to be learned from that experience. Invoking Michael Fullan's maxim that change is paradoxical, we set forth six paradoxes that have recurred in our own work. Though paradoxes, by definition, can never be fully resolved, they *can* be successfully balanced or juggled. We conclude the paper with the suggestion that *transformational change* (as distinct from additive or evolutionary change) is the act of balancing these paradoxes.

Change as a Noun: What Changes are Most Significant?

Since the turn of the century, Jewish educational institutions have been assessed and found wanting. In each generation a variety of changes have been prescribed: a panoply of textbooks and curricula; several contradictory approaches to teaching Hebrew; strategies for the recruitment and training of teachers; conclaves for celebrating Shabbat away from families; retreats for celebrating Shabbat with families, and so on. Some of these changes were proposed in articles and speeches, but never found their way into practice. Others were attempted, only to be abandoned a few years later. Still other changes became permanent fixtures of their institutions, yet the hoped for improvement in the state of Jewish education remained unrealized.[3]

Today there is renewed talk of change in Jewish education, in the context of what might be termed the "continuity crisis." In theory and in principle, Jewish education is the key to Jewish continuity; in practice and in reality, however, few educational institutions, as they are currently configured, are able to fulfill this potential. Congregational schools (which have come in for the most criticism) are limited because they teach knowledge and skills in a vacuum. Day schools, which have many more hours at their disposal, can fill this vacuum while their students are still in school, but rarely conceive of their task in the larger context of the students' families and communities, both present and future. Camps and Israel trips provide powerful experiences, but rarely work systematically to link participants and their families to ongoing Jewish life.

This thumbnail assessment of the strengths and limitations of each of these institutions provide a clue to what we mean when we call for *significant change*—the kind of change we need if we are to meet the challenge of Jewish continuity. The crisis of continuity is the result of missed connections between individuals, families, institutions, and the Jewish community at large. The response to this crisis must be as multi-faceted and far-reaching as the problem. Jewish education can only meet this challenge if it is both formal and informal, identity building and knowledge-imparting; it must be able to reach people at every stage of the life cycle; it must offer individuals and their families communities in which to live Jewish lives. In the words of Jonathan Woocher:

> [F]rom a strategic as well as an historic perspective, we would do well to focus not just on individual choices and actions, but also on the existence or absence of Jewish social realities that are likely to affect the cognitive, affective, and behavioral systems of Jewish individuals....Today being actively Jewish is no longer natural, and we cannot make it natural through intellectual or even emotional appeals alone. ...

> [W]hat would be needed in order to counter the attenuation of Jewish identity are more powerful Jewish plausibility structures in the contemporary world -effective surrogates for the organic, encompassing, authoritative Jewish communi-

ty that exists no more. [Woocher 1995, p.19]

A tall, seemingly impossible order. Yet we all know first-hand of institutions have been able to transform themselves to meet this challenge. Synagogues that were once moribund are now vibrant centers for lives devoted to *torah, avodah and gemilut hasadim.* Day schools have served as the focal point for the revival of neighborhoods. JCCs have turned Jewish lectures and concerts into major cultural events, and themselves into hubs of Jewish activity.

What distinguishes these legendary institutions from the myriad of others, whose attempts to change have resulted in more of the same? Fullan (1993) distinguishes between "projectitis" ("where the latest innovation is taken on without either a careful assessment of its strengths and weaknesses, or of how or whether it can be integrated with whatever is going on," (p.51)) and change efforts that are infused with "moral purpose." The type of change we need is one that would yield "a holistic Jewish education, anchored in the life of real Jewish communities and capable of interpreting and communicating the depth and complexity of that life." (Woocher 1995, p.33)

The Process of Change

If holistic and deeply rooted education is our goal, how can this goal be achieved? Is successful change simply a matter of serendipity, of the right person just happening to be in the right place at the right time? Can the right person go about finding the right place and, by dint of effort, make this the right time? Can a place that isn't right find and nurture people who rise to the occasion? In other words, how can one set about to deliberately make significant change happen?

In laying the groundwork for our respective projects, we began by reviewing what we knew about the history of

change in Jewish education (Pilch 1969; Zeldin 1983; 1984; Shevitz 1992). Looking back on nearly a century of change efforts, it was sobering to think of how few of these took hold in any significant way. Despite Samson Benderly's large urban Talmud Torahs at the turn of the century; despite the Jewish Teachers' Unions of the 1920's and 30's; despite the best efforts of the National Board of License in the 50's and 60's, and of CAJE in the 70's and 80's, Jewish teaching has never truly become a profession. The United Synagogue's Menorah Curriculum and the UAHC's Schuster Curriculum have come and gone; even the curricular materials of the Melton Center, though still in print, are vastly underutilized.[4] Ivrit B'ivrit, open classrooms, and cooperative learning have all been blips on the screen. Reviewing this sad history, it was hard to keep from wondering: would family education and avocational teachers be the next casualties? What could possibly help us succeed when so many who have gone before us have failed?

Analyzing these attempts at change, both those that have been documented and those that are only part of the "oral tradition," we made a list of the reasons why these changes failed either to take hold or to achieve their desired outcome:

1) Those who advocated change had a vision of a future state, but little understanding of how to translate their ideas into concerted and effective action.

Having a vision or an ideal is only the preliminary step. To have a chance of realizing the vision, one must have an understanding of the social forces that might prevent the vision from taking hold, and a hypothesis about some appropriate levers for change. One must also realize the necessity to operate simultaneously on multiple fronts in trying to realize the hoped for result. A classic example of the failure to go beyond rhetoric to action has been

documented by Susan Shevitz in an article entitled "Communal Responses to the Teacher Shortage." Reviewing major Jewish publications over the span of a quarter of a century (1950—1975), Shevitz found scores of articles decrying the shortage of qualified teachers in supplementary schools, and containing dozens of ideas about how to solve the problem. "It was not for lack of ideals that widespread inaction prevailed. Indeed, many ideas—good and bad, bold and timid, practical and visionary—were proposed." (Shevitz 1988, p.25) Yet few of these ideas were ever tried, and those that succeeded on a small scale were never implemented on a larger scale. Among the reasons Shevitz offers for the failure to translate these visions into action is the fact that many of the recommendations would have required religious and communal agencies to work together, thereby intruding on one another's turf, and that few educational leaders had both the will and the skill to broker such a partnership.[5] In other instances, where political forces were joined together to push for change, political will alone proved insufficient to the task of bringing about significant change.

2) Advocates of change didn't anticipate and were not prepared to handle the resistance they would encounter because one or more of the following factors were at play:

• **inertia** ("we've always done it this way;" or "we tried that ten years ago and it didn't work")

• **resignation** ("kids are _supposed_ to hate Hebrew school")

• **fear of the unknown**

• **aversion to risk**

• **failure to communicate a compelling vision in concrete and accessible terms**

Fullan writes: "If there is one cardinal rule of change in human condition, it is that you cannot *make* people change. You cannot force them to

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think differently" (Fullan 1993, p.23). People need to have compelling reasons to believe that change will be a good thing. In addition, their unhappiness with the current state of affairs must outweigh their feelings of discomfort and uneasiness in making a transition.[6]

> A host of aphorisms remind us how integral to human nature resistance to change is:
>
> from John Kenneth Galbraith: "Faced with a choice between changing one's mind and proving that there is no need to, almost everybody gets busy on the proof." (quoted in Bridges 1991, p. *ix)*
>
> from Anatole France: "All changes, even the most longed for, have their melancholy; for what we leave behind is part of ourselves; we must die to one life before we can enter into another." (quoted in Bridges 1991, p.20)

When people's felt needs, both intellectual and emotional, are not addressed, or when their personal interests are challenged but not outweighed by institutional interests, resistance is a most natural outcome.

3) The decision to change was made by too small a group.

The literature on educational (and organizational) change is brimming with accounts of changes that were decided upon by a small inner circle,

only to be resisted or sabotaged by those who were supposed to implement them. A classic example is the case of an innovative "open plan" junior high school, designed to facilitate team teaching, in which teachers built makeshift walls from bookshelves, in order to create the self-contained classrooms to which they were accustomed (Smith and Keith 1971). Examples from Jewish education abound as well: curricula and textbooks that languish in the storage room; policies ranging from discipline to the *wearing of kippot* that teachers discretely ignore.

There is much talk today about bringing in a "range" of "stakeholders" to "invest" them in an institution's change effort. This talk is entirely appropriate, but, in our experience, devolves too often, in practice, into the inclusion of the token teacher, woman, parent, or community member. At other times, stakeholders are brought in as a tactical maneuver in a plan to co-opt them into making the decision a leader wants. Lasting change requires a true sense of investment by a wide range of people, who feel they are being adequately represented in the process of decision-making.

4) People's conception of change was too simplistic and mechanistic. It was assumed that change could be accomplished by either:

- **telling people what to do** (such as passing a "binding resolution")

- **purchasing a new textbook, curriculum, or program**
- **sending people to a workshop in which they would learn how to make the change**
- **bringing in a new staff person**

To quote Fullan again:

> You can effectively mandate things that (i) do not require thinking or skill in order to implement them; and (ii) can be monitored through close and constant surveillance.... But to accomplish...important educational goals...*you cannot mandate what really matters,* because what really matters for complex goals of change are skills, creative thinking, and committed action. [Fullan 1992, p.22, emphasis added]

This explains why a variety of new curricula and teaching methodologies either remain underutilized or appear to be ineffective—the teachers who are supposed to be using them lack the skills, creativity and commitment. The workshops that are supposed to prepare teachers to use these materials are usually too short in duration to enable teachers to acquire the skills, and too removed from the ongoing life of the school to nurture the requisite creativity and commitment.

Even when a new staff member (who has these abilities) is brought in, that staff member's influence remains limited unless supported by the culture and policies of the institution. In their

formative evaluation of the Sh'arim Family Education Initiative in the Boston area, Shevitz and Karpel (1995) found that both the new family educators funded by the project and the institutions in which they worked focused their attention primarily on the mounting of programs rather than on the building of an infrastructure to promote family involvement. They question whether this short-term focus will, in and of itself, be sufficient to change the way in which families relate to the institution.

What all these examples have in common is that they assumed that all change required was a discrete set of political actions, or staff development programs; they underestimated how difficult it would be to embed the change in structural and cultural adjustments.[7]

5) The institution did not have enough resources (either human or material) to support the change.

If one accepts the analysis offered thus far, an unavoidable conclusion follows: Change is a painstaking effort, requiring great human and material resources. Both the institution and the individuals involved in it need patience. A number of change efforts which attempted to avoid all of the pitfalls described above still failed because of a lack of either funding or staffing or the requisite staying-power. The introduction of family education into a number of day school settings, for example, could not be sustained once outside funding was no longer available.[8] Conversely, congregations that have begun to transform their educational efforts have found that the new plans required an expanded staff, an enlarged space, and plenty of time. (Block 1995; Thal 1995)

Building the Prescriptions into the Process

Mindful of these lessons and the prescriptions implied by the converse

of each lesson, we approached our own projects, the *Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE)* and *Day Schools for the 21st Century* (DS21), both launched in 1994, with caution. Despite the difference in settings, the goals of both projects are similar: to promote educational efforts with individual learners and their families that are holistic and deeply rooted, and to foster the development of communities connected by a commitment to Jewish learning. These projects have been described more fully elsewhere; our focus here is on how the projects sought to incorporate the prescriptions derived from the lessons of earlier change efforts into the change process.

- At each site a deliberative body (a task force) is responsible for leading the change effort.

- Members of the task force were chosen to represent diversity of stakeholders, including those who have the responsibility and power to make decisions about changes, those who will be responsible for implementing the change, and a range of potential beneficiaries of the change. Among the responsibilities of the task force is constant two-way communication with as many of the constituents as it is feasible to reach.

- The task force is a laboratory in which to create and test a genuine sense of partnership between lay and professional leaders.

- The process of deliberation includes both Jewish study and an inquiry into current institutional and social realities. Study creates community, between the diverse voices in the room, and between the voices of the past and the voices of the present (Visotzky 1991). It is a wonderful model for the deliberative process, in which guiding visions and values emerge from the confrontation between …traditional ideals and current reality.

- Though all of the participants bring their own values, visions and plans for change to the process, they are asked to open themselves up to exploring the alternative values and visions of their fellow stake-holders. The collective vision and plan for the institution emerges from the deliberations of the task force and its conversations with wider circles within the community.

- The task force works towards change in two ways: In the short term, it looks for "low hanging fruit," programs that are easy to mount and that give people a taste of the vision as it evolves. For the long term, it devises a plan for the new structures and procedures that will be required to infuse the congregation or school with intensive, widespread, participatory learning and living.

- The task force process is labor intensive. The task force must work on several tracks simultaneously: evolving a vision, getting input from the constituents at large, instituting short-term changes, identifying goals, structures and issues for the long term, and continuing to grow through study. Multiple, overlapping conversations need to take place to keep everyone abreast of this dynamic complexity. At each site, a coordinator is needed to keep track of all the pieces, and in touch with all the participants; the national "office" contributes to this effort by providing advisors and consultants, and by holding workshops in which institutions work together with their counterparts around the country.

Some Paradoxical Lessons of Change

What have we learned from these two projects, which are now completing their second years? If we think of change as a noun,, as a state to be reached, we have an impressive array of "low hanging fruit," but only hints

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of the structural and cultural changes that are yet to come. We have yet to learn if truly significant change can be created through this type of concerted action.

On the other hand, if we think of change as a verb, we have already learned a great deal. We have learned that with time and effort " procedures can be put into place that will allow an institution to work towards significant change in a productive manner, avoiding, at least thus far, some of the obvious mistakes of earlier change efforts. We have also learned a great deal about what it feels like to undergo change. Fullan writes of change as a journey into uncharted territory. Though one cannot obtain, at the outset, a detailed topographical map, one can do many things to prepare oneself—one can hone certain skills and be on the lookout for certain signposts. To conclude this paper we want to offer a number of the lessons we have learned on the first leg of our journey. As we searched for the words to articulate these lessons, we found that they had a certain paradoxical quality:

1) **Readiness for change requires both a baseline of stability and a modicum of dissatisfaction with the current situation.** Change is difficult to manage when the institution is facing a crisis, wonders how it will survive, or when key leaders are thinking about leaving. The opposite, however, is equally true: an institution which is set in its ways and which perceives its traditions as ingrained and as making a contribution to whatever success the institution has achieved will also have difficulty changing. In one of the DS21 schools, the process only got off the ground once the prevalent mood at the school changed from "We are already so successful; what do we need to change for?" to the realization that schools always need to be growing and changing. Generalizing from our projects, the window of opportunity for change seems more a matter of culture than of chronology; the institution must be stable enough to contemplate the unsettling journey that change requires, and flexible enough to welcome the opportunity.

2) **Change must be rooted in tradition while focused on the future.** One way to deal with the emotional resistance to change is to remind people of the successful changes that have already taken place in the institution's history. For example, one congregation in the ECE recounts often the successful transfer of leadership from a retiring rabbi to his successor; another tells of the benefits that accrued to the institution from various structural changes. One of the DS21 schools tells of its recent success with a values-driven, text-based discussion that led to some limited changes in school policy. Yet the successes of the past must be balanced against the challenges of the future. The limitations of the current situation must be faced, without denigrating the programs, efforts, or people that are currently in place. The promise of living up to the institution's potential must be constantly held out for all to see.

3) **Successful change is both planful and emergent.** Change won't just happen on its own; it must be carefully considered, and painstakingly plotted. Yet the "itinerary" cannot be adhered to rigidly, lest it become a straighjacket. DS21 provided schools with what they came to call an "islands chart," a graphic depiction of the stops along the route of change. The itinerary has built-in choice points, yet even so, the schools found additional ways to "make the process their own" by introducing stops, questions and processes that were not set out beforehand. At the outset of the ECE, a timetable was created for the work of the congregational task forces; not one congregation has adhered to the timetable. Had the timetable not existed, however, the congregations would have had no benchmarks against which to measure their progress; nor would they have had a sense of what work lay ahead.

4) **The institution's leaders must be must be able to inspire others, even as they are inspired by them.** People's investment in the process of change will be in direct proportion to their level of participation in its planning; yet it is rare that newcomers to the planning process will have as much to offer as the institution's leaders. Thus, the leaders

must practice *tzimtzum* (Borowitz 1974/1992), holding back their own vision and nurturing others while they develop theirs. To use Buberian language, leaders and their constituents must be in dialogic relationship over an extended period of time; not an easy task amid the day-to-day I-it world of either synagogues or schools.

5) **Change agents must take the long view while navigating the short term.** The change process has been likened to driving a car while changing the tire, or living in a house while it is being renovated. The school's discipline policy, for example, must be followed, even as it is being critiqued and revised. Existing committees must continue to function, even as the entire committee structure is reconsidered.

6) **Successful change requires both action and analysis.** What makes it possible to balance the seeming contradictions listed above? Those who seem to manage this balancing act best are at once self-assured and self-critical; they are both participants and observers. As anthropologists can attest, this is a skill that can be learned; it is the skill of self-reflection and of action research. (Brookfield 1986; Oja and Smulyan 1989; Stringer 1996) Practitioners and board members, being people of action, do not easily take up the habits of analysis, writing memos, devising evaluation forms, and setting aside precious meeting time for reflection on the process itself. We have found that it helps to have at least one person on the task force who is skilled, and even professionally trained, for this task. In some cases, researchers are part of the task force; in others, psychologists with facilitation and reflection skills are part of the deliberative body. And in some cases we have been lucky enough to have professional leaders who see process as just as important as product. Analysis and reflection can also be modeled by outside advisers and consultants, but whatever the source, an individual catalyst can serve to introduce analysis to balance the task force's natural concern with action.

Transformational Change: When the paradoxes are held in balance

In closing, we want to offer a tentative definition of transformational change: When an institution and its leaders participate in this balancing act, when they can be self assured and self critical, take the long view while minding the short, remain at once inspiring for and inspired by their fellow members, act both planfully and flexibly, focus on both past and future, feel both stable and open, they are engaged in the process of transformational change. This type of change is different from additive change (Shevitz 1995, Cuban 1995) because its aims are so ambitious; it differs from discontinuous change as described in the business literature (Nadler et. al. 1995), because it is so rooted in institutional traditions. It differs from evolutionary change in that it is planned, and from mandated change in that its process in inclusive and participatory.

The goal of this transformation, at least as it applies to the field of Jewish education, is for the institution to become a learning community. This term has a double meaning: it is a community which views learning as a defining characteristic; integral to its culture is a vision of the entire community as a coordinated network of learners. It is also a community which is continually growing—learning to become more learned, more responsive and more cohesive. This is the final element which differentiates transformational change—it is a never-ending process. It is also a very Jewish process: In the words of Pirkei Avot:

לא עליך המלאכה לגמר:
ולא אתה בן חורין להבטל ממנה

You are not required to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to abstain from it.

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